That is not it at all

An Exhibition Statement Submitted to the

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University of Saskatchewan

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By

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That is not it at all

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS


Levi Nicholat
That is not it at all
mfa thesis exhibition
August 29 to September 9
Gordon Snelgrove Gallery
University of Saskatchewan
Murray Building rm 191
hours: Mon-Fri 9-430
reception: Sept 9, 7-10pm
Gordon Snelgrove Gallery is supported by the Dept of Art and Art History, College of Arts and Science, University of Saskatchewan, with Museum Program assistance from SaskCulture Inc (Sask Lotteries).

It is impossible to say just what I mean!
But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:
Would it have been worth while
If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,
And turning toward the window, should say:
"That is not it at all,
That is not what I meant, at all."

T.S. Eliot
The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

That is not it at all

Painting is a language. Brushstrokes are letters, images are words and the relationships between the elements form the sentences and narratives. The works included in this exhibition continue my interest in personal narrative and using painting as a medium for communication. In the development of my artistic practice I have often been frustrated, like Eliot's Prufrock, at not being able to say just what I mean. Even if I can find the words, they do not always adequately convey the intended meaning. Over the last two years, I have been exploring the language of painting and alternative approaches for translating abstract ideas into visual form. Painting has been declared "dead" in the past,

yet it continues to endure. It lives on because it can be endlessly reinterpreted and reinvented. Like all languages, it can be taken apart, fragmented, manipulated and reassembled in an infinite number of combinations. The paintings in this exhibition are collaged representations, pieced together using fragments of art history as well as elements and images from other sources. I am interested in the creation of representations and the inherent complexities, contradictions and limitations associated with this pursuit. "There's this huge gap between reality and its possible representations. And that gap is impossible to close." (Jaar) Though it may be impossible to close, the space between reality and representation is also a space of infinite possibilities.

As a painter, I work within the context of the history of painting, which is vast and well documented. I work with paint because of its immediacy. Other mediums require more forethought and meticulousness and allow little room for mistakes. Acrylics enable me to work in a responsive manner, editing and making changes as each painting develops. While I work, I am surrounded by images—art historical texts, photographs and magazine clippings—that are an endless source of inspiration. This context necessarily informs how I will go about creating my representations. It is almost impossible to stylistically approach painting in a way that has not already been explored. I am not particularly obsessed with the idea of novelty but at the same time, I do not want to re-create something that has already been done. "[T]he problem becomes, how do you go about making a painting?"(Enright, 82)




Figure 1 (above left). Levi Nicholat, *Sprinkler*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72".
Figure 2 (above right). Levi Nicholat, *Farm Hands*, 2009, oil on canvas, 48" x 60".
Figure 3 (bottom left). Levi Nicholat, *Backhoes*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72".
Figure 4 (bottom right). Levi Nicholat, *King of the Hill*, 2010, oil on canvas, 60" x 72".

For over 100 years artists have used collage to create new configurations with existing elements. My approach to painting has always utilized collage in varying degrees. Early paintings like *Sprinkler (fig.1)*, *Farm Hands (fig. 2)*, *Backhoes (fig.3)* and *King of the Hill (fig. 4)* were constructed using several photographic sources but the images are combined to produce a more or less illusionistic representation with accurate scale relationships and deep perspective. *Sprinkler* and *Farm Hands* are somewhat more imaginary than illusionistic and all of the works are painterly and stylized to a degree;

however, my intention at this early stage was to create a cohesive pictorial space rather than to highlight the constructed nature of the composition.

These early paintings were all similarly intended as meditations on themes of masculinity, conformity, deviancy and queer identity. Then and now, the male figure is the primary subject of my work. Multiple figures arranged in ambiguous spaces are used to construct remembered, imagined and metaphorical narratives. As a gay artist that works primarily with the male figure, my work is inextricably tied to queer identity issues. The history of queer art adds another layer to the context in which I situate my work. I am indebted to artists like Carl Van Vechten, Paul Cadmus, David Hockney, Francis Bacon, Robert Mapplethorpe, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, David Wojnarowicz, General Idea, Evergon and many others who explored queer themes at times when it was not considered acceptable. Because of their efforts, I work in an environment that is much more accepting of my perspective; where queer representation is no longer a significant, revolutionary act in itself. In the 1980s, Carlo Maria Mariani's painting, *The Hand Submits to the Intellect*, was interpreted as "a celebration of homosexual culture." Mariani rejected this reading because it "turns the painting into an ideological program; it is far more desirable that the viewer…engage the dialectic of conceptual and formal aspects that gives shape to the artist's dialogue with the past." (Hoesterey, 27) Similarly, my work is not a political statement but an exploration of my personal subjectivity. Because my works are personal narratives, queer identity necessarily factors into the reading; though, it is only one of many themes that I am interested in exploring.

Accepting that queer identity is an implicit theme in my paintings, my interest shifts to material concerns and an exploration of alternative strategies. *Splash (fig. 5)* was my

first attempt to deliberately move away from the convention of pictorial illusion. It references David Hockney's iconic paintings of California swimming pools and is constructed using images pulled from fashion magazines, vintage pin-up illustrations and stock photography websites. It does not attempt to seamlessly stitch these elements together but to highlight its constructed nature. The figure in the foreground is composed of two distinct images with an abrupt transition. While there is some spatial depth using perspective, significant distortions and drastic scale shifts disrupt the potential illusion.

Figure 5. Levi Nicholat, *Splash*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 72".

Two years after this painting was completed, collage continues to be the foundation of my practice. It is a common strategy in contemporary art—and contemporary society in general. "It is all part of the new pick-and-choose landscape of images, ideas and media in which [we] live,…all available whenever [we] want them." (Kissick, 71) For contemporary artists, it is "a pretty natural thing to go through the history of painting and pick out aspects of the things you're interested in and go forward with those." (Enright, 82) Despite its prevalence among contemporary artists; however, it is not a uniquely contemporary approach. Marco Livingstone notes the presence of a similar strategy in R.B. Kitaj's work dating back to the 60s:

> Kitaj, in effect, was quoting technique as well as style—jumping suddenly from one idiom to another, each often possessed of its own historical associations—in largely the same spirit in which he borrowed much of his imagery: as a means of appropriating whatever he found of interest, of extending his range and of declaring the possibility of speaking in whatever voice was most suited to the things he wished to communicate on any particular occasion. (Livingstone, 17)

In a recent article on contemporary abstraction, Sharon L. Butler defines a similar approach, which she terms "New Casualism":

> There is a studied, passive-aggressive incompleteness to much of the most interesting abstract work that painters are making today. The painters take a meta approach that refers not just to earlier art historical styles, but back to the process of painting itself. These self-amused but not unserious painters have abandoned the rigorously structured propositions and serial strategies of previous generations in favor of playful, unpredictable encounters… With less investment in honing a unique visual language, [they] use earlier forms of abstraction the way Rauschenberg used found objects. In the process, there is no room for handwringing about originality; it is simply assumed that it will result from synthesis and recombination. (Butler)

Butler's article focuses exclusively on abstract painters but the self-conscious referencing and recycling of visual culture is also prevalent throughout a range of painting genres. Neo Rauch's paintings combine socialist realism with comic book figuration in a

unique style that speaks to the hybrid culture of East Germany. Justin Mortimer's Frankensteinish figurative paintings explore the grotesque aspects of the body, while Norbert Bisky's fantastical paintings of young Aryan boys fetishize the idealized body. Even Jenny Saville superimposes several images of the same figure in her paintings, creating a multi-perspectival, fractured representation that is similar to the approach pioneered by the cubists. Similar strategies are also present in the work of Karim Hamid, Jim Gaylord, Matthias Weischer, So Young Park, and many others. In my own practice, which involves a studied but playful appropriation of art history and visual culture, the paintings present rather than obscure their collaged nature. It is a "natural" response in the contemporary context, in which so much visual information is so instantaneously accessible. Consciously and unconsciously, things that are seen and experienced inevitably filter into my work. The challenge for me is in how to put them together.

Because the space within each of my paintings is foremost a mental space, I allow process—the physical actions as well as the decision-making—to figure more prominently. I have always approached painting with a great deal of editing and layering, which results from a degree of uncertainty, insecurity and frustration. In the past I would hide the evidence of my revisions. My earlier works were fairly literal representations, conceived with a great deal of forethought, which attempted to construct and communicate allegorical meaning. They often failed or, if they succeeded, they still failed. They stated their intentions too directly, leaving no room for mystery, which did not seem to be congruent with the subjects that I was exploring in my work, themes that are complicated and deeply personal. The excessive, almost neurotic, reworking that occurs in my paintings is motivated by a desire to communicate just what I mean, which is difficult when those

Figure 6. Levi Nicholat, *Fr(i)eeze (in progress I)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60” x 96”.

Figure 7. Levi Nicholat, *Fr(i)eeze (in progress II)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60” x 96”.

thoughts and ideas cannot be easily put into words or are not yet clearly formed. Painting becomes a process of discovery. Kitaj, talking about William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, says:

> One of his types allows for the poet (artist) to *find* his intention in the course of writing (read: painting), to discover his idea after he's begun. This is very important for my own work. Why should I not discover intentions, ideas, meanings, long after, it occurred to me…" (Livingstone, 18)

Kitaj's statement is relevant to my own practice, which is like a search without direction. This is not to say that there is no intention behind the work; rather, that when I begin, I do not know where I might end up. I trust that the process will decide the outcome—that the intentions will be clear after they have been formed on the canvas—and there is no point in attempting to predetermine the end result.

Figure 8. Levi Nicholat, *Fr(i)eeze (in progress III)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 96".

The earlier works in this exhibition, which were finished in a more unified manner, only offer a finished product. The more recent paintings, on the other hand, also retain some evidence of the paths not taken. Motivated by the exploration of a particular iconography, metaphor or personal narrative, each painting begins as a drawing on the canvas. These first layers are quick, simplified gestures that block in the major compositional elements. From this point, there are various ways that I may approach different parts of the painting. Some areas become flat planes of colour, others are more realistically rendered and drawing inevitably returns to the surface. As the painting progresses, the imagery is re-worked several times, new elements are added and others are lost. The finished paintings that develop through this process could not have been pre-meditated.

Figure 9. Levi Nicholat, *Fr(i)eeze (finished state)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 96".

Bathers (figs. 10-12), for example, remained a work in progress for over a year. It was started soon after *Splash* and continued my exploration in constructed images by combining multiple elements with incongruent scale relationships that recede to different vanishing points. Referencing historical bathing scenes by artists such as Seurat, Degas, Manet, Cezanne, Matisse, Eakins and others, it presents a seemingly banal scene of men swimming. The implication of homosexual desire and the undertone of violence complicate a straightforward interpretation that simply places the painting in line with accepted tradition. The painting had been "finished" several times but I was never satisfied with it because it seemed to state its intentions too definitively. I continued to periodically rework it in order to destroy its certainty. The traces of process—the ghost images, the elements of drawing, the re-worked areas and the untouched passages that reveal the layers

Figure 10. Levi Nicholat, *Bathers (state I)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 120".

Figure 11. Levi Nicholat, *Splash (state II)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 120”.

Figure 12. Levi Nicholat, *Bathers (state III)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 120”.

underneath—visualize the struggle to have it communicate the right words. It is a searching, self-conscious approach that expresses something more honest—albeit ambiguous—than any declamatory statement I ever tried to make.

Allowing the process to determine the outcome of each painting creates a dynamic visual tension between elements that exist in varying states of finish. Repeated layering fragments and abstracts both the figures as well as the spaces they inhabit, blurring the lines between the two. Figures appear as if they are either coming together or in the process of becoming undone—simultaneously emerging and dissolving. The contrast between figuration and abstraction creates a constant back and forth experience. Realistically rendered elements within the paintings create the illusion of pictorial depth, allowing viewers to visually enter. The abstracted elements disrupt the illusion, returning viewers back to the surface of the painting. Scale is another important consideration in this respect. My canvases range in size from 4 feet by 5 feet to 6 feet by 10 feet. The emphasis on scale references historical paintings of the 18th and 19th centuries as well as the traditional conception of painting as a window into another world. Working with the figure at a large scale gives the representations a bodily presence as well as allowing viewers to be more easily absorbed into the space of the painting, in further contrast to their abstract qualities.

The contrast between figuration and abstraction necessitates a constant negotiation of both the pictorial logic and, in turn, the meaning. The ambiguity in my recent paintings further complicates a straightforward comprehension of the representation. It hinders literal interpretations but at the same time opens an infinite number of alternative possibilities for viewers. Painting is a language that can be taken apart, fragmented and reconstituted in endless ways. "When you spend time with painting, you break down the

Figure 13. Levi Nicholat, *Parade (previous state)*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 96”.

Figure 14. Levi Nicholat, *Parade*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 96”.

elements and you pull them out and move them around. At this point in painting so many aspects are so well defined… You can use them to produce different effects." (Enright, 78) A process-based approach opens up new pictorial conventions and expands the definitions of "finish" to include the incomplete, illogical and ambiguous. Ambiguity is a way of opening up the possibilities for viewers. "[P]aintings can destabilize the chain of signification, which opens up the space and allows people to bring their [own] string of associations." (Enright, 80) When the pictorial logic is complicated or destabilized meaning can no longer be definitively fixed, requiring viewers to actively engage with its construction. This can create a degree of tension as viewers have a tendency to desire comprehensible pictorial logic. In the search for comprehension, the openness allows each viewer to construct his or her own meaning.

Figure 15. Levi Nicholat, *de-rection (previous state)*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 96".

Figure 16. Levi Nicholat, *de-rection*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 72" x 96".

The paintings in this exhibition are explorations of personal narratives. It is difficult to identify any unifying content other than an interest in my personal subjectivity; however, the paintings function on other levels as well. On one level they are investigations into the history and materials of painting, infused with art historical references and stylistic quotations. As collages, they speak to the notion of novelty through recombination with a playful, contemporary self-consciousness. As fragmented representations of reality, they consider some of the possibilities that exist in the gap between reality and representation. Finally, they explore arts ability to communicate visually; to express things that may not correspond to words and to give form to unconscious intentions.

Figure 17. Levi Nicholat, *campfire*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 72” x 96”.

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